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ABSTRACT

An examination of approaches to teaching writing and how they relate to tests may help writing teachers discover some ways of improving students' scores on writing tests. George Hillocks in "Research on Written Composition," describes four instructional approaches: presentational, natural process, environmental, and individualized. The three latter approaches, although newer than the traditional presentational mode, emphasize process and still consider any interest in a written product as outside immediate concern. The latest preoccupation in writing seems to be narcissism--classifying, and teaching writing from a social, transactional, or epistemic perspective. The intention is not to divorce product from process, but that process must be reunited with product. If students are to be adequately prepared for all kinds of writing, including the test essay, they need to be made aware of how situations differ rhetorically. Students need to know that there are many forms of discourse to suit many rhetorical situations. In order to develop this sensitivity, students need to be presented with a variety of assignments in which meaning and form are developed together through successive drafts, conferencing, peer evaluation, and extensive revisions, assignments with built-in constraints of time, topic, and form. Lloyd Bitzer's terms of exigence, constraints, and audience are also components which relate to writing assessment. (Fifteen references are attached.) (RAE)

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WRITING ASSESSMENT AND THE NEW APPROACHES

According to most writing tests, students at all levels of education are not writing any better now than they were fifteen or twenty years ago. The 1984 National Assessment results show no improvement over 1974; college entrance and proficiency tests are much the same year after year. The question "Why can't Johnny write?" that coincided with a rush of interest in literacy twenty years ago is still a painfully valid question. Test scores in writing continue to be below our expectations. We are not seeing results of what Maxine Hairston has called a Kuhnian paradigm shift--from emphasis on product to concern for process. Call the shift what you want--we have certainly seen a great deal of theoretical activity in the last decade or two. And this activity is not being reflected in the assessment tests. Why not?

Is there something wrong with the emphasis on process? Is there something wrong with the tests? In an April 1987 SLATE Starter Sheet, John Maxwell says let's not question the tests or the process; let's instead call for better teaching conditions: smaller classes, decreased workload. Now, you're not going to find any English teacher--certainly not me--arguing that point. Of course we can teach better if we have smaller classes and less work to do. But faulting the workload is too easy--and too fruitless. If we want to see any change in our lifetimes, let's look at what WE can do--not wait for bureacracies to find the money to hire more teachers and build more classrooms. So I want to do precisely what Maxwell says let's not do; I want to look at our approaches to teaching writing and how they relate to the tests, with the anticipation of discovering some ways of improving scores on writing tests.

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Now let me say first of all that I understand that not every English and language-arts teacher in the country teaches writing by a process approach, that the trickle-down theory, if it works at all, is still trickling. But I'm not quite ready to agree with Hairston when she says that "the overwhelming majority of college writing teachers in the United States are not professional writing teachers" and that they teach writing "by the traditional paradigm" --the old-fashioned way, with emphasis on product, expository essays, form, and a linear composing process beginning with an idea and ending with editing. That position puts a few people "in the vanguard of the profession" (Hairston's term) and the rest of us in the ranks. Now if that's the case, then the answer to assessment results is simple--just get more of us out of the ranks and into the vanguard.

But I have a basic mistrust of simple answers, just as I reject simple dichotomous descriptions. All those unprofessional teachers are NOT teaching the same way they did twenty or forty years ago; they are NOT oblivious to what's going on in the profession. They know about people like James Moffett and James Britton and Flower and Elbow and Lunsford and Emig and Kinneavy--and Hairston. And they're reading about collaborative learning and writing across the curriculum and peer evaluation and free writing. They ARE attending conferences like this one and NCTE and AERA and especially local--grassroots!--conferences. They ARE being influenced by the vanguard. So we do need to examine the new approaches--the ones that haven't yet influenced the writing assessment scores.

George Hillocks in RESEARCH ON WRITTEN COMPOSITION describes four instructional approaches: presentational, natural process, environmental, and individualized.

The PRESENTATIONAL, he says, is teacher-oriented, having relatively clear and specific objectives. The teacher possesses certain knowledge,

and the best way of getting that knowledge across to the students is to tell them--by means of formulas, rules, examples, and admonitions. Feedback comes when the writing has been completed. What Hairston, Richard Young, James Berlin and others term "current-traditional"--the old way.

The NATURAL PROCESS mode has generalized objectives and makes heavy use of free writing about whatever interests the students. Ideas are explored and discovered through writing. Feedback comes from peers with successive drafts. It assumes that students will learn or invent forms as they discover meanings and that methods that are more structured will inhibit the development of imagination. The "new paradigm."

The ENVIRONMENTAL mode, says Hillocks, has clear and specific objectives and structured activities that engage students with each other in small-group problem-centered discussions. It assumes that writing skills are identifiable and can be taught, that, moreover, one of the major functions of prewriting is to develop the skills required for a particular writing task.

Finally, in the INDIVIDUALIZED mode students receive instruction through tutorials, programmed materials of some kind, or a combination of the two. It assumes that a teacher working with an individual student is more effective than a teacher working with a whole class.

So we're talking about three newer approaches here--natural process, environmental, and individualized--all of which, Hillocks found in the research he analyzed, were more effective than the traditional presentational. You've probably read these findings, but let me remind you that in Hillocks' study the natural process came out only slightly ahead of the much-maligned presentational; environmental was far and away the most effective approach to teaching writing.

Lester Faigley, James Berlin, Patricia Bizzell, and others have classified approaches and processes too. (Our latest preoccupation in the discipline seems to be narcissism--classifying ourselves, writing our own history, researching our research, predicting our future.) What the classifiers seem to be saying is that those in the vanguard (so to speak) are interested in teaching writing from a social, transactional, or epistemic perspective. Writing is not a private act; it is an activity that is influenced by and a part of the social environment; words have histories; readers construct meaning out of their own social and personal perspective, and writers discover meaning only as they write. Writing is not so much a means of communication as a way of learning.

Part of what we're seeing now is a move toward what Hillocks calls the environmental mode of teaching, in which students actively participate in their own learning through teacher-constructed, goal-centered assignments. But the emphasis on process is still there. We still consider any interest in a written product as outside our concern. Meaning will be discovered as we write, and form will emerge with content. Numerous drafts are required; the process is extremely messy; we often share our drafts with others in order to benefit from their feedback; our final draft is just a stopping place, something we need to turn in because it's time.

This is reflective, or expressive, writing. It's difficult, it's slow, it's familiar--because we all do it. It's like writing a paper for 4C's or an article for COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION. You start thinking about it a year or so in advance, incubate it for months, let it develop slowly. When you read journal articles you relate them to your new idea; you sound out your colleagues for their reactions to your thoughts and you welcome their input. When you finally start writing, you still don't know for sure what you're going

to say. You have an idea, but until you start expressing it in written words it's still just an incubating germ. We know this kind of writing well, and so we teach it to our students. Or try to.

But there's another just as valid kind of writing. We do it when we have to write an annual report or a memo to colleagues or a summary of activities. It's not much fun, but we have to do it. Our students do it when they write summaries, essay exams, research reports, lab reports. This is transactional writing, meant to get something done, and the form and conventions are usually established before we start. We don't do this writing to discover meaning, though meaning will undoubtedly develop and clarify as we write. We do this writing to report information, to show that we can do something or that we know something, to request something, to remember something. If we're good at, we can sometimes get it done in one draft, two at the most. And we CAN get good at it. We learn the forms, the conventions, the vocabulary, the style by doing it and by reading it.

This kind of writing is often relegated to a current-traditional designation because of its emphasis on product. It IS product-centered. The product is the thing. Well, not entirely. When students write summaries it's not to tell their teachers what the articles are about but to show the teachers that they know how to write summaries, and if the assignment is constructed well <u>the writing is the learning</u>. By writing summaries, students learn how to write summaries. They also learn the usefulness of summaries for acquiring and retaining information. So there is process involved in even the most structured writing, and, mind you, my intention here today is not to divorce product from process. To the contrary, I contend that we must reunite product with process.

Which gets me to the point of this presentation. Students writing under a process approach have mainly one advantage in assessment tests: according to Willa Wolcott, it's that they have experience using heuristics for discovering ideas on a subject they had not previously considered. While they have also had extensive practice with revision, they don't have much opportunity for the kind of revision they've practiced.

Other disadvantages for process-centered writers are that they have no experience handling the time constraints; they are often penalized for personal expressions, especially when those expressions don't fall within the parameters of the assignment; and they are sometimes unfamiliar with the expected form and conventions.

Students writing from a product-centered approach have some of the same disadvantages: they've had little experience with time constraints and limited revision, even less with pre-writing skills. They may be familiar with the forms and conventions, but they don't always find something to fill them with. Both groups seem unable to deal with revision in the time available to them. They overlook how a developing idea can unexpectedly end up making a point different from the one expressed in the beginning and that they must adjust the thesis statement accordingly. They don't allow time for correcting errors.

I don't think we can fault the tests for imposing time constraints; writing under imposed time limits is something our students need to do. Nor do I think we can criticize the tests for imposing a given topic--so long as there is a reasonable expectation that it comes within the students' experience. There

are problems with writing tests; there are always problems with tests. Tests never give every test-taker the opportunity to do his or her best, and some test-takers have advantages that others don't. But we should also remind ourselves what a recent luxury it is to talk about tests of writing ability as WRITING, not error hunts. And that what a student writes is at least some evidence of ability. Generally essay readers are conscious that the essays they are reading are essentially rough drafts written under difficult conditions. And if a person can write adequately under difficult conditions, he or she can undoubtedly write adequately or better under more ideal conditions.

So, I'm not here today to fault the tests. Faigley and colleagues assert that holistically scored writing samples do not reflect current rhetorical theory or adequately measure the ability to write, and I'm sure they're right. Alan Purves refers to our "abysmal ignorance" about testing, and Arthur Applebee says that until we can emerge from the "Age of Alchemy" about testing, "relying on old formulas and dictums handed down from earlier days," we will have no answers to some of our vital questions nor evidence in favor of changes. Maybe some day we'll know more about our tests and devise better ones. But I don't think we've found them yet--not the complex system described in the Faigley book, not portfolios.

But let's not be complacent about our teaching either. Let's face the fact that product does count. It's evidence of the process, and it's the only part of the process that the reader has any direct contact with. As Marie-Jean Lederman has said so well, "What is altered does not matter to the reader, nor does the ease with which the writer composes. In the real world, product is all we can share with each other." And the very aspects of the product that are valued in testing—clarity, organization, support, coherence, and

correctness--are the characteristics of writing that are valued in the world outside of testing.

If we want to prepare our students adequately for all kinds of writing, including the test essay, we need to make them aware of how situations differ rhetorically. And we need to help them to be sensitive to those differences. If we use the Aristotelian triad of ethos, pathos, and logos, we need to assist our students to develop a sensitivity to how these components apply to each situation. I think that all too often, and especially perhaps when the emphasis has been on self-discovery, writers will focus too much on the ethos, trying to make the rhetorical situation conform to what they want it to be, suiting the writer, forgetting the audience. Students need to know that there are many forms of discourse to suit many rhetorical situations.

If we want to assist our students in developing this sensitivity, we need to present them with a variety of assignments. In addition to reflective assignments in which meaning and form are developed together through successive drafts, conferencing, peer evaluation, and extensive revisions, we need to make assignments with built-in constraints of time, topic, and form. Through writing under such constraints, students will develop a sensitivity to rhetorical differences. They can learn that often the assignments outside of school are just as prescribed as those in the school setting, whether the writer needs to report on a given body of information, summarize particular activities, or use a form already dictated by convention.

If we look at the rhetorical situation in Lloyd Bitzer's terms, we see that it has exigence, constraints, and audience. If a writer or speaker enters the rhetorical situation, he or she becomes part of it. Let's examine these components for a minute as they relate to the writing test.

First, **exigence** of the testing situation is very real. For students who write the English Composition Test for the College Board their matriculatation to an eastern schooldepends on their writing performance. Students who attempt to pass a writing proficiency test must succeed in order to declare a major field or gain credit for the writing course. Second, the test environment, **like any rhetorical situation, has its constraints**, and we've talked about them today: time, topic, form and conventions. The point is that constraints are not peculiar to tests; they're characteristic of every rhetorical situation, and teaching to the test by exposing our students to various situations can make better writers in all situations. The same goes for **audience**. Students who fail proficiency tests or score low on assessments sometimes do so because of their insensitivity to the fact that their reader is their examiner. I have read papers by students whose essay personae were overtly fascist or sexist, who accused English teachers of being unfair graders, who write from the notion that only ideas are important and errors don't matter.

What is also significant about Bitzer's description of the rhetorical situation is that it comes into being without the writer or speaker. Some rhetorical situations expire because no writer or speaker enters them, but once the situation is entered, the writer becomes part of the situation. If we admit that the situation is pre-existent, then we also must acknowledge that the writer is limited by its exigence, constraints, and audience. A student test-taker, then, can't impose a different audience or ignore the constraints--can't alter the situation just by the imposition of his or her ethos. Students need to know this--that because of the exigence--the need to succeed--they must be sensitive to the situation as it actually exists.

An exclusively process-centered approach is not the way to better student writing, no more than an exclusively product-centered approach has been--

and this is true whether we're talking about assessment tests or any other way of judging writing ability. As a discipline, we seem to be moderating our stance on process-oriented, expressive writing and moving toward one that acknowledges the importance of the product. There are signs of our once again acknowledging that sometimes form does precede content, that often writers perform under real time and topic constraints, that tested writing is real writing. With all our narcissism and mirror-gazing, as a discipline we may soon know who we are. And I predict a rise in writing assessment scores.

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